TRT WORLD

OPINION 6 YEARS AGO

The violent misogyny that partners India's stripping of Kashmiri autonomy

Kashmiri bodies have always been used as a battleground for Indian forces in the region and the latest move from India comes with the looming threat of further violations.

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GETTY IMAGES

A Kashmiri Muslim woman hurls rocks at policemen during a protest in Srinagar, 10 November 2004.

It is day five of the forced silencing of Kashmir following the revocation of Article 370 that gave it the so-called 'special status'. Unable to contact family, all one can do is repeatedly check social media for the slightest chance of any news escaping from home.

On the morning of August 8, while scrolling through Twitter hoping to find something to ease my longing, a news report caught my attention. "Highest Number of Searches for 'Marry Kashmiri Girl' Came From Delhi in The Past One Day," the headline read, highlighting the most popular Google searches in India after the Kashmir decision.

The report also listed some tweets of Indian men talking about 'getting Kashmiri girls' now. Based in Delhi myself, for a moment, I didn't know how to react. As a Kashmiri woman, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to feel. But was I shocked? Absolutely not.

A day before, a legislator from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party proudly proclaimed that bachelors in the party were welcome to go to Kashmir and marry white-skinned Kashmiri women.

The Kashmir-related misogyny rising to the top in India reproduces tropes presenting Kashmir as some sort of beautiful, feminised territory. That this hapless, beautiful land seeks a saviour is what feeds into the militarised narratives to 'protect' it.

The objectification of Kashmir and Kashmiri women within India's national narrative is not new. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was known to be so obsessed with Kashmir that he would often compare it to a 'beautiful lady'.

The calls for the revocation of Articles 370 and 35A giving special rights to the permanent residents of Jammu and Kashmir was also based on 'gender discrimination'.

At the time it was noted that women who were permanent residents of the state but married an outsider lost their property rights, which led to a popular narrative taking hold which called upon India to play the 'saviour' for these women.

However, it was a 2002 High Court decision that struck down the law which disallowed women marrying non-state subjects from buying property in Kashmir. The Jammu and Kashmir Permanent Resident Status (Disqualification) Bill 2004 which sought to overturn this ruling lapsed after no voting in the Legislative Council - and the bill was never re-introduced.

While this is not to make a case for the Indian Constitution applying to Kashmir in any form but to point out that the very argument on which the saviour narrative was built on, was flawed all along. Instead, what has come forth is utter misogyny on the part of those who wanted to 'save' Kashmiri women.

Your body, my choice

Route 6

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Transcript

symbolic violence against people. India has relied on sexual violence as a weapon to 'humiliate' the entire community by attacking women.

The seven-decade resistance to India in Kashmir has brought men and women, young and old, out on the streets to protest routine state violence that takes varied forms including killings, mass blinding, torture, sexual abuse, enforced disappearances, destruction of property, and harassment.

The presence of close to a million armed forces, including the additional deployment in recent days, is a source of great insecurity for Kashmiris. As a Kashmiri woman, my lived reality is underlined by constant vulnerability and the threat to my body from the Indian military's steady gaze.

In coercing the manufacturing of a nation in Kashmir, the state has relied on exotic gendered tropes. The contestation over the territory of Kashmir is playing out on our bodies. That Kashmiri women have stood alongside men in being vocal about the right to self-determination, and rejecting India's control, has subjected women to multiple forms of state violence.

The mass rape in the twin hamlets of Kunan Poshpora in northern Kashmir's Kupwara district in 1991 by a battalion of the Indian Army, followed by subsequent denials by the state, provides one of the many examples of how the war has brought violence into people's homes. Close to three decades later India has not delivered justice. The perpetrators enjoy absolute impunity.

During my PhD, where I looked into the specific relationship between gender-based violence and the militarisation in Kashmir, a lot of women spoke of beatings and abuse by armed forces as a frequent occurrence. So much so that they didn't mention it when I would first ask, as they thought it was too 'normal' to require a special mention. "*Ath kya chhu wannun, yi chha pathei"* (what do we have to say about it, it is a given!) would be the remark.

Women have been targeted for their activism, for being 'sympathisers' of the militant movement, in retaliatory action for being relatives of men who had taken up arms to fight Indian forces or for merely being the Kashmiri 'other' in relation to the Indian state.

Sexual violence perpetrated against men is rampant as part of interrogation and torture techniques to extract information but has hardly been documented.

Route 6

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violence.

As uncertainty looms large over Kashmir, with a stringent curfew still in place and all forms of communication suspended, the potential for human rights violations is peaking.

Sexual violence as a weapon of war in Kashmir has now merged with the hyper-nationalist, misogynist, racist public discourse over 'controlling' and 'owning' Kashmiri women. One hopes there is international outrage over it. For their part, Kashmiris, as they have for the last seven decades, will continue to battle for a dignified life of freedom. But will the world finally take note?

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Samreen Mushtaq is a Kashmiri researcher based in Delhi. She recently completed her PhD on Gender, Conflict, and Nationalisms in Kashmir.

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